

Drug overdose deaths during COVID: Worse than expected

OSF HealthCare Newsroom

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Drug overdose deaths spiked dramatically during the COVID-19 pandemic. According to the [Centers for Disease Control and Prevention \(CDC\)](#), nationwide a record 93,000 people died from a drug overdose in 2020, a 29% increase over the previous year. The state of Illinois saw more than a 27% increase in deaths, while Michigan recorded a 16% increase.

While the numbers may be shocking, for some they weren't surprising.

"With the pandemic everybody's isolated, you've got a downturn in the economy and you had people unemployed. So when you're isolated and overdosing, even if you gave them Narcan there's not going to be anyone there to help, to administer it, to reverse it. It's the perfect storm with those three ingredients," says Jerry Storm, senior vice president of pharmacy services for OSF HealthCare.

"People who were seeking treatment often didn't have it available. Other people who were really on the edge, who we knew were at risk, then started using substances as a way to cope better, to deal with this - the loneliness, the isolation, anxiety and depression," adds Cheryl Crowe, vice president of behavioral health for OSF.

Their jobs within OSF HealthCare make Cheryl Crowe and Jerry Storm keenly aware of a drug crisis that the Peoria, Illinois-based health care Ministry has been working to address for years. Crowe says they were just starting to make great steps forward in their efforts – reducing the amount of opioids prescribed, getting treatment strategies in place – and then the COVID-19 pandemic hit, sending everything backwards. Recovery has been slow.

"We know that about one in four individuals struggles with a mental health issue, addiction - substance abuse disorder - being a part of that. Right now it's looking like one in three individuals are struggling so those numbers are growing. I think we've done better with our prescribing practices but what we're seeing is the volume of patients in need and a lot of people due to social isolation may have resorted to this as a coping mechanism at greater numbers than before. I wish I could quantify it. I just know that our overdoses when we look at our ED volumes are continuing to grow," explains Crowe.

At one time prescription painkillers were the focus of the overdose epidemic, but those have been overtaken by heroin and, more recently, fentanyl, a dangerously powerful opioid which in some cases is found to be contaminated with other substances. The CDC data suggests fentanyl was involved in more than 60% of the overdose deaths last year.

With 15 hospitals across Illinois and the upper peninsula of Michigan, about half of them serving more rural areas, the drugs being used are as varied as the communities. Isolation, along with illegally manufactured substances, has only made matters worse.

"Fentanyl has that analgesic quality that a lot of these individuals take. It's too much, they stop breathing and no one's around so we're seeing those deaths attributed to that. Some of our more rural regions we're seeing that it's not only opioids. It's methamphetamine. It's cocaine. All of those substances are on the rise in those communities," says Crowe.

Adds Storm, "it's kind of a hidden monster that's back there and once we get beyond the pandemic this is going to be another large - you can call it epidemic because it's not worldwide. But I've got concerns regarding fentanyl crossing the borders and we continue to see it escalating."

While it may be slow, there has been progress made to address the situation. Treatment facilities that were closed due to COVID-19 restrictions are reopening, OSF is looking at telehealth strategies and potential partnerships for those in need of support, and proper narcotic dosing education with providers continues.

If you or someone you know is struggling with a substance abuse disorder, reaching out to a [Behavioral Health Navigator](#) can get you connected to those who can help.